



Designed for Success

Corporate communications & the inner game

David Norris

davidnorriscoaching.com

Personal message



I'm a coach who loves comms. After two decades in communications, leading teams in the UK and Asia, in 2023 I became an executive coach.

My single biggest cohort of clients have been communicators. This gave me an unusual perspective on comms and privileged insights into the kinds of issues comms folk are dealing with.

As a comms leader, my focus was content. As a coach, my focus is the person. I got to see "under the hood" of the careers and lives of people who share things with their coach they rarely if ever share with others.

Turned out, my comms clients wanted support mostly on themselves. I wasn't helping the communicator. I was helping the human behind the communicator.

I began to see that there is an "outer game" of circumstances, actions and behaviours, and an "inner game" of thoughts, feelings and understandings. The inner game is dominant.

So began my exploration of the inner game in the context of corporate communicators and their organisations.

This paper contains a hopeful message: that by better appreciating the significance of the inner game, life (including work!) gets better and easier. When we play from the inner game, we draw on that part of us that is designed for success.

In a nutshell

(For those short on time)

The qualities that matter most are not technical skills but inner resources. This is especially true in a field like corporate communications and even more so at senior levels. Inner resources are the source of clarity, resilience, creativity and leadership - both for individuals & organisations. When we cultivate our inner game, we are designed for success



On one page

(For those with a little more time)

The qualities that help us perform at our best are not technical skills but inner resources. This is both obvious and radically challenging.

Obvious because we all know people who have an abundance of technical skill but are lacking in all the human qualities that matter. On the flip side, we also know people who might not be the best technically but are the kind of people we love to work with.

Obvious because when we feel good, everything becomes simpler and better. There's less trying and more doing, less worry and more playing. When our spirits fall, everything gets more complex and difficult.

Obvious also because we have an intuitive sense that, in the end, high performance is an inner game. It's the game artists call being "in flow", sport stars describe as being "in the zone", and the rest of us refer to more simply as being "on a roll" or "firing on all cylinders". When we lose "it", we're "off our game", "lost our mojo" or are plain "out of it".

Challenging because most of the time our focus is on the outer game. This is the game of gaining skills, experience, and figuring out how to impress the right people. It's the game of looking for recognition, techniques and tips, and reasons why our career isn't as it should be. It's the game of fear and self-judgment, storymaking and regret, reactivity and limitation, perfectionism and comparison, overthinking and a need to know what will happen next.

A more inner-game focused approach to work is beneficial in any profession. Yet there are some professions – those that are intense, highly visible, unpredictable, and require high levels of creativity, judgement and people skills - where it is especially useful. One of those is corporate communications.

Communicators who adopt a more inner-game approach access more of the inner resources they need to perform better and be happier. They are more involved in process and less invested in outcome – which, ironically, tends to improve outcomes! They also begin to leverage their impact in their teams and on their organisations. They cultivate and live from that part of them that is designed for success.

Dedication

With thanks to all my friends,
colleagues and associates in Asia,
Europe, North America and Australia
who helped make this paper possible.
Your time, ideas and support were
invaluable and are deeply appreciated.

May 2025



Contents



1

INTRODUCTION

A personal journey from comms to coaching, discovering the inner game, and a few boring (but important) points on terminology.

3

CASE STUDIES

Using coaching case studies to get more concrete about playing the inner game and accessing inner resources.

5

DESIGNED FOR SUCCESS

How the inner game reveals that the mind is designed for success - and why many communicators are missing out.

2

WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA?

Why inner resources trump outer skills, why it's especially important for communicators, and why inner resources are not fixed.

4

BENEFITS

How playing the inner game directs us towards clarity of mind, healthier relationships and better listening - and why that's good for communicators and their stakeholders.

1

INTRODUCTION

A personal journey from comms to coaching, discovering the inner game, and a few boring (but important) points on terminology.

Key Points

- This paper is the output of reflections from over 20 years in communications plus 2 years coaching.
- The reflections led to an insight that there is a mismatch between the qualities people think are most important in communications versus those that are experienced as most important by communicators.
- The insights have been validated and revised through interviews with over 25 communicators across 8 countries in 4 continents



Corporate communications is a high-stakes, high-pressure profession. Every day, communicators juggle competing (yet all important) priorities, deliver to tight deadlines, create content and manage all kinds of internal and external stakeholders.

Communicators are expected to be the calmest voice in a crisis, the thinker behind the message, the cultivator of organisation's culture, the force that projects and protects its brand.

It's a role that demands an unusually wide range of strategic, technical, interpersonal and creative skills. To deal with the volume and intensity of the work over time, communicators also need to know and manage themselves to a high level.

After two decades in communications, I entered the world of executive coaching. Communicators made up my largest group of clients. Initially, I expected their main issues would be skills-based – like designing an engaging townhall, writing an uplifting speech, or coming up with creative ideas for a leadership video. I thought I would help by leveraging my own comms experience.

To my surprise, they rarely asked for that kind of support. Instead, they sought help on more underlying issues, like confidence, difficult relationships, managing the boss, and how to deal with stress, overthinking or anxiety.

“ You can put anyone through a course to learn a particular skill, but you can't fake things like confidence. I see a lot of imposter syndrome and inability to speak with authority. ”

Communicator, USA



Two features became evident quite quickly. First, these issues were of overriding concern to these individuals, overshadowing their experience of work. Second, the clients were not comfortable seeking support within their organisations, either for fear of retribution or of being negatively labelled.

“ I think we consider it a weakness when we realise we need to develop ourselves – things like how we handle stress. Seeking coaching or training should be seen as growth not punishment or embarrassment. ”

Communicator, Hong Kong

As I grew as a coach, learning more about how we all experience life and are shaped by it, I wondered how my new understandings might help others in comms or those who will enter the profession?

The more I reflected the more I felt there was a mismatch between the qualities commonly considered to be most important versus those being revealed in my coaching work.

“ If you are an actuary, you're constantly being sent to training. As a comms professional, this isn't the case. There's no systematic approach to training. You're just expected to know the latest trends and skills. In this way we are often alone. ”

Communicator, Hong Kong



Sensing it would be useful to validate my thinking, I reached out to a few other comms professionals, eventually speaking at length with over 25. They helped flesh out and refine my thinking further. Much of the creativity and utility of this paper – and all of the quotes in the yellow boxes – belong to them. All input was offered on an anonymous basis.

Definitions: inner game, outer skills, inner resources

Whenever I shared with someone my intention to write this paper, the most common reaction was to quickly either agree or disagree with its main points. This was interesting mostly for the fact that I'd barely had time to explain its main points! Often, when we had the chance to go deeper, it became apparent we were talking about different things. So, before I jump into the deep end of this paper and risk losing you, let's take a few moments to be clear on a few key terms.

Inner v outer game

The inner game is the action within the arena of the mind. The “outer game” is the action outside, in what we often call the “real world” (eg organisational structure, colleagues' behaviour, or market conditions).

The inner game is a concept borrowed from performance coaching in sport. According to its creator, Tim Gallwey, it “is played to overcome all habits of mind which inhibit excellence in performance.” (The Inner Game of Tennis, 1974)

Gallwey offered a model that each player is made up of two selves – Self 1 and Self 2. Self 2 is the “doer” (coming up with all the ideas and carrying out the work). Self 1 is the “teller” (constantly narrating, judging, comparing and criticising). The key to higher performance lies in improving the relationship between these two selves.

The idea of us each having "two selves" is not unique to Gallwey.

Carl Jung's psychology began with a personal sense of having two selves, the "child of our time" and the "timeless individual".

Indian sage Jiddu Krishnamurti says we have two minds, one "conditioned," another "always young".

Russian philosopher George Gurdjieff feels we had two selves, one higher, one lower.

American psychologist Julian Jaynes believed early humans had two parts: one that produced inner voices, the other that heard these as commands.

British author Robert Spira says we have a "separate self" and a "true self".

German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche is credited with the popular notion that "the toughest opponent is yourself".

Most of my own coaching clients refer to themselves casually as if they were two people: "I beat myself up", "I keep telling myself".

Communicators will appreciate more than most that the protagonist in every fairytale has a false, frustrated self and a true, heroic self.

Want to know what Self 1 and 2 look like in practice? Picture a sportstar (or communicator!) instructing or admonishing themselves: "C'mon, you can do this!" / "Why did you do that!" Now ask, *who are they talking to?*

When one plays from the inner game, one is more aware of these two selves. One is more able to shift attention from the destructive Self 1 and towards the constructive Self 2.



Over time, one becomes more able to operate from a mind that is less noisy and more still. One is more resilient to whatever appears to be happening “to” you, more clear on what is actually going on, and better able to draw on one’s full resources in deciding what to do next.

The key point I wish to draw out from this concept of the two selves is how it points us towards our true, inner self and the resources we find there.

Outer skills, Inner resources

Throughout this paper I refer to “outer skills” and “inner resources”. I recognise that many people use different terminology for these, or mean something different by them. Therefore, it’s worth stating up front my own definitions for clarity.

Outer skills are the technical, “know-how” abilities that are acquired through training, experience or mentoring. For comms roles, these will often be skills related to writing, speaking, listening, analysis, or technologies. These are acquired or passed down from some external, authoritative source such as a manager, a trainer or an online course. Outer skills are abilities that we focus on the most earlier in our careers or in more junior roles. They are often skills that are increasingly being outsourced to external providers or technologies like AI.

“ Outer skills are table stakes. Working with the CEO, that's when inner resources need to be at athlete level. You've got to be super resilient, be able to make decisions with incomplete information, remain calm despite not knowing if the next 24hrs could bring a major crisis for which you can't really be prepared. ”

Communicator, Canada



Inner resources are one's psychological abilities to thrive no matter the external circumstances. These include things like self-awareness, resilience, confidence, quality of thinking, creativity and the ability to nurture healthy relationships. These resources cannot easily be acquired from the outside, but are instead brought out from within. Inner resources are abilities that become more important the higher up one goes within an organisation. These are abilities that increasingly become differentiators in terms of a leader's effectiveness, and are very hard to outsource

“Outer skills are table stakes. Working with the CEO, that's when inner resources need to be at athlete level. You've got to be super resilient, be able to make decisions with incomplete information, remain calm despite not knowing if the next 24hrs could bring a major crisis for which you can't really be prepared.”

Communicator, Canada

Alternative terms: soft skills, personality, EQ

Some of my interviewees instinctively replaced these with terms with their own, most often “soft skills v hard skills”, “personality type, and “IQ v EQ”.

“**Soft skills**” comes closest to what I mean by inner resources. Perhaps the most compelling advocate for soft skills is consultant Tom Peters, who condenses 40+ years of his life's work into six words: “Hard is soft. Soft is hard”. Peters points to, among others, Google's Project Aristotle, which found that the seven top characteristics of success at Google were all soft skills, such as listening, insight and empathy. These findings are strongly aligned with this paper. That said, there are important two reasons I avoid using the term “soft skills”.



First, “skills” suggests something one obtains and develops through dedication and hard work, most often by taking some kind of training course. One might work on communication skills by taking an online course in public speaking, for example. This is welcome but is not the same thing I mean by “inner resources”. By the latter term, I’m pointing to resources we all already have but do not always realise or access to the extent we could. In other words, “skills” suggests “outside-in” whereas I am pointing to “inside-out”.

Second, in my experience the term “soft skills” often struggles to resonate. Partly, this may be down to it sounding, well, a bit soft. Busy corporations generally have limited appetite for sponsoring the development of soft skills – at least those that are not obviously intended with a hard purpose, like presenting, negotiating or leadership. Partly, it may also be down to an assumption among individuals – especially those with career success behind them – that they already possess strong soft skills. This is why, unless directed to do so, most people do not choose to take training on, say, empathy, insight or even listening skills.

A number of my interviewees understood “inner resources” as a reference to one’s **personality type**. In this case, the sensible course of action would be seek an assessment, like MyersBriggs, CliftonStrengths or Facet5, then develop ones skills accordingly. There are two major limitations with this approach.

First, if one’s qualities are a result of one’s personality, this tends to suggest that they are more or less fixed (indeed, several of my interviewees argued for this explicitly). However, in my view this tends to overvalue such assessments. A personality assessment is useful as a snapshot of where you are, but it does not tell you who you are. No surprises that people often find their “personality” has changed when they go back and retake an assessment several years later.



Second, by its nature such an assessment goes only personality deep. It may reveal, say, that one is high on “Affection” and low in “Energy” – but it will say nothing on why or what might be done to address those reasons. One of my coaching clients, for example, identified strongly with a diagnosis that he had ADHD. Several sessions later, he began to see that the characteristics that gave rise to that diagnosis were actually a healthy response to an unhealthy environment while growing up. He now saw them as confirmation that there was actually nothing wrong with him. He started to see himself in a whole new, more positive light.

As for the terms “**IQ v EQ**”, these remind me of the joke where most people agree there’s an EQ deficit but at the same time rate themselves above average. It’s always easy to see a lack in other people (particularly, it seems, in senior management!). In my experience, any blind spot that may limit someone developing their emotional intelligence is the same blind spot that prevents them seeing they need to do so. More broadly, I would be cautious about these terms for two reasons:

First, I feel wary about viewing “inner resources” as matters of intelligence. It introduces the ideas of measurement, scorecards and even competition. Indeed, there are many such assessment tools on the market. At that point, the inner eye immediately shifts to one’s comparative score rather than to the actual qualities it claims to measure.

Second, like “personality”, any EQ measure is merely a snapshot in time of one’s current emotional state. It’s about where we are, not who we are. It says nothing about why the emotions are there, where they come from and what one can do about them. In other words, it remains quite surface level. In contrast, “inner resources” points to a deeper level of qualities that we all have at least in potential form. It helps to shift the conversation to a more positive frame around releasing rather not fixing, tapping not lacking.

2

WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA?

Why inner resources trump outer skills, why it's especially important for communicators, and why inner resources are not fixed.

Key Points

- **Hypothesis 1:** “inner resources trump outer skills”. I argue there are five reasons this is true. Communicators I surveyed agree almost unanimously.
- **Hypothesis 2:** “inner resources are especially important for communications”. I set out 12 ways in which this is true. There was an almost-equal split among the communicators I surveyed: 52% disagree / 48% agree.
- **Hypothesis 3:** “communicators can benefit simply from seeing this special quality”. I set out eight reasons to back this up. Communicators in my survey overwhelmingly agree.
- **Hypothesis 4:** “inner resources are not fixed – but we act like they are”. Here I discuss what, if anything, we can do to improve our ability to play the inner game and access greater inner resources. Communicators were fairly evenly split, the majority (56%) feeling that our inner resources are fixed.

Hypothesis 1: Inner resources trump outer skills

In any job, there is a need for both outer skills and inner resources. Through my coaching, it has become increasingly clear to me that the latter are disproportionately important, especially in more senior roles. To note, this applies generically across all industries. We will get to how it applies in a special way to communicators later.

“You would need to have exceptional outer skills to compensate for lack of inner resources. If you're in the 99th percentile and have unique skills, maybe you can thrive. But then you'd be a specialist not a leader. If you want to be a leader, you need those inner resources.”

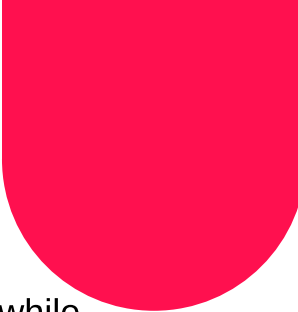
Communicator, Hong Kong

There are five reasons why I believe inner resources are disproportionately important:

i. **Inner resources are the ones we get stuck on:** people have little trouble identifying an area for improvement in their outer skills. They are usually fine about sharing this with others, for example to seek advice or help finding a course. In contrast, when people have a gap in their inner resources they often feel stuck and are unclear about why and what to do. This often results in a negative feeling that weighs on them heavily, which makes them feel bad, confused or, all too often, “not good enough”.

“Inner resources are crucial. The ability to handle pressure, to work well with colleagues you may not like, for example. We have to work with everyone in comms.”

Communicator, UK



ii. **Inner resources are the qualities people most admire in others:** while people do think well of others for their outer skills, this tends to fall into the category of respect. When pressed on the qualities they admire in others, it tends to be things like the ability to perform under pressure, being able to connect and get on well with people, or the ability to be creative and draw out growth in others.

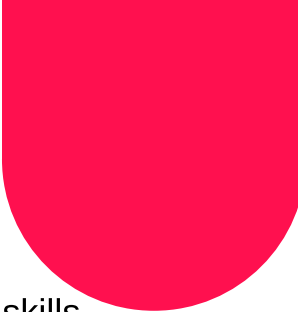
“ I look up to a leader who makes comms admirable. They make the job look noble. They make me realise you can be an effective leader with high competence and also have integrity and honesty. ”

Communicator, Canada

III. **Inner resources are the qualities that bring people meaning and contentment:** it's possible for a person to function at a high level yet at the same time feel in a state of stress, anxiety or unhappiness. Indeed, among the clients I have coached this is extremely common. i. Such clients tend to have invested heavily in developing their outer skills while paying far less attention to their inner resources. As they redress the balance, the contentment and meaning they find in their work go up.

“ It's taken as a given that I can write and have the basic skills of comms. What sets people apart are the soft skills. They aren't soft at all. They are the hardest. ”

Communicator, UK



iv. **Inner resources enable people to cope and thrive in change:** outer skills help people perform well so long as circumstances remain stable. However, inner resources are key to doing well during times of change. Many of my clients have found themselves feeling uncharacteristically ill-at-ease during times of transition, such as a reorganisation, the arrival of a new manager, a promotion or lateral move.

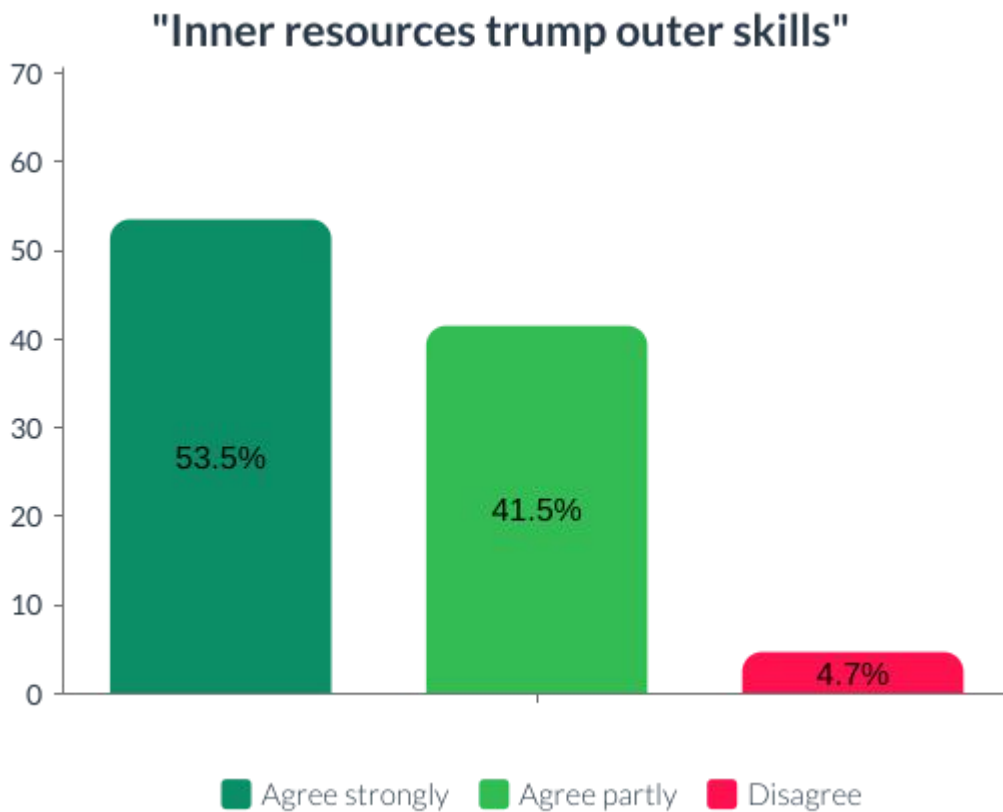
“ A great comms person is someone who has done the inner work. Someone who has done the work to understand themselves so we can work on objective reality, not acting out our internal issues ”

Communicator, Singapore

v. **Inner resources are the qualities that are most needed in senior leaders:** outer skills help get someone promoted, but the higher they go those same skills become relatively less useful compared to their inner resources. This is easiest to see in the most senior leaders, who are above all expected to be good at things like connecting and inspiring others, and are rarely expected to be excellent at technical tasks.

What Communicators Say

There was near-unanimity among the communicators I surveyed on Hypothesis One. Over 95% of respondents agreed that inner resources trump outer skills, with over 50% agreeing strongly (43 responses).



Hypothesis 2: Inner resources are especially important for communicators

If it is generally true that inner resources trump outer skills, particularly at more senior levels then, I believe, it is especially true for communicators.

This plays out practically in a number of ways – at least 12 ways by my latest count, as we will see shortly. First, I want to underline that I am not saying that any individual factor is absent in other professions. The distinction I'm making is that communications has a special combination of all 12 factors together. For example, one of the factors is honesty. There is a great need for this in, say, legal and compliance but that profession has far less need for, say, creativity-on-demand.

It's also key to my argument that each of the 12 factors requires well-developed inner resources to perform at high levels. With greater inner resources, a person is better able to manage pressure, nurture relationships, source creativity and practise sound judgement. In contrast, a person with underdeveloped inner resources (or is going through a period where their inner resources are depleted) will tend to experience comms as a relatively highly pressured, challenging and unrewarding place to work.

“ Comms is among only a very limited group of functions which requires such a powerful combination of inner resources. People who struggle with these may come to a point where they realise comms is not for them. ”

Communicator, Singapore



Designed for Success

– you’ve got the book, now
join the program!

Designed as a follow-up to the book, this 4-day online retreat will help you to show up with:

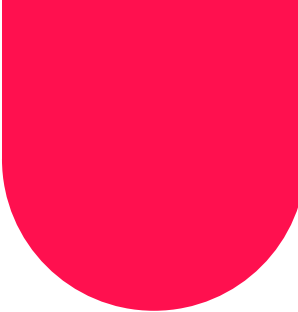
- more confidence, presence and peace of mind.
- less worrying and overthinking, more feeling happy.
- a simpler way to learn, gain insights and find solutions.
- a better understanding of why people do the things they do.

What past participants say:

- “The course unlocked a greater sense of peace within me”
- “I’ve never felt more present! Truly a life-changing course.”
- “Feel like I’ve found the piece of the puzzle I was looking for!”
- “It’s like a user manual for our mind. A toolkit I can use to show up with clarity, confidence, and calm.”

For details, visit:

davidnorriscoaching.com/designed-for-success-program



In addition, it's worth clarifying that – as with the characteristics of any individual – the special characteristics of communications can manifest positively or negatively depending on context.

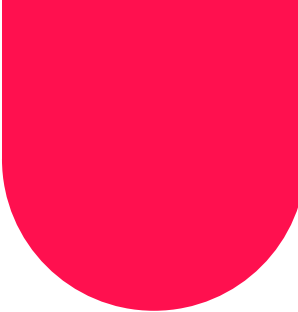
“ Everyone is different. Some of these pressures are seen as positive by some. It may be about how to turn some of these negatives into positives. ”

Communicator, Australia

For example, one of the special features of communicators is that we tend to operate in small teams surrounded by larger teams. Many of my interviewees said this often made them feel isolated, misunderstood or undervalued. Yet this same feature can be experienced positively – a Hong Kong communicator told me it made her feel like a “superconnector”. My case is not that one or other of these views is correct, but that both are correct, depending on context. When we are under pressure – which in comms is much of the time – we are more likely to feel the same feature in a negative way.

“ Access to all the functions make me feel superconnected. I have a better understanding of the business overall than people in most functions. ”

Communicator, Hong Kong



The 12 factors I believe make the primacy of inner resources especially true for communicators are:

i. **Power gap:** Communicators regularly work with executives several grades above them in the hierarchy. It's not uncommon for a mid-level or even junior comms specialist to work directly, day-to-day, with the CEO. Communicators therefore tend to work more with high-powered executives in busy, highly pressured environments relative to peers in other sectors.

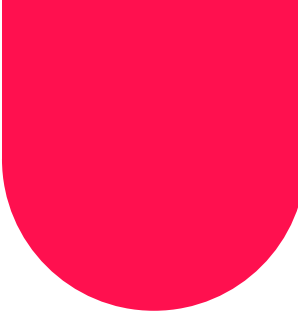
“ People look to us to coach the most senior leaders. This is mind boggling! People ask us to deal with the CEO because they are scared to do so. Others come to us looking for advice on how to handle the CEO. ”

Communicator, Hong Kong

ii. **High stakes:** Communicators' workloads tend to be intense, filled with multiple mission-critical, highly sensitive and confidential projects week in, week out. Communicators commonly work on back-to-back major projects with hard deadlines, from financial disclosures to organisation announcements, from product launches to M&A deals, and from leadership events to transformation initiatives. Almost every significant decision across an organisation has a comms component. As a result, there is rarely a quiet period for people working in comms.

“ We run on adrenaline. We cross the finish line, only to have to do it all again. You're constantly on the clock to get done by a certain point. ”

Communicator, Australia



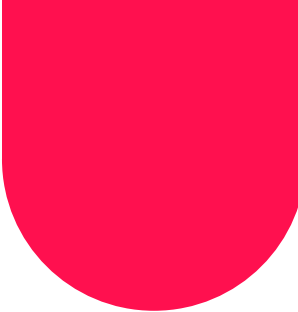
iii. **Position:** Communicators tend to work in relatively small teams surrounded by larger teams. There is an expectation to understand what other teams are doing, in order to help shape their narrative and deliver impactful communications. The reverse is not true: there is no expectation for other teams to understand what communicators do (though, ironically, many often think they do!).

“ It can be a really lonely job. We often don't have colleagues doing the same job near us, so we don't have people understanding what we're going through. You can be surrounded by thousands of people but feel very isolated. ”

Communicator, Hong Kong

“ Everyone thinks they can do comms, that they know better. It's underappreciated how much comms requires a unique skill set. I would never go into an IT dept and tell them how to configure a network! ”

Communicator, UK



iv. **Visibility:** Almost all communications work is high profile, with large audiences internally and externally. Therefore, far more so than in many other fields, communicators live with the constant experience of being judged. The main exception is the work communicators do on reputational or crisis management – where an equal or greater pressure comes from preventing visibility. To the extent that an individual feels stress or discomfort from being judged, communications can be a distinctly pressured environment in which to work.

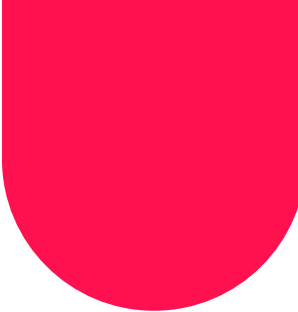
“ Just the fact that everything we do is so visible makes it all high stakes. ”

Communicator, Hong Kong

v. **Creativity on demand:** In addition to handling an intense workload, Communicators also need to be creative. In other words, they are expected to be as productive as technicians and creative as artists. This is an unusual combination. Unlike many creative industries, such as filmmaking, communicators generally work to immovable deadlines, with limited (if any) breaks between projects. Unlike many mass-output industries, such as manufacturing, communications generally involves generating unique, one-off and often disposable content.

“ People hold us to a higher regard when it comes to creativity. They ask, what are you going to do next time? I'm thinking, I'm going to do the same thing! ”

Communicator, UK



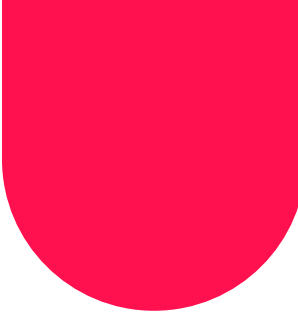
vi. **Relationships:** Communicators need unusually deep and broad people skills. They need to be able to work with personalities of all types and at all levels up and down the hierarchy and right across the organisation. Relative to people in other disciplines, then, communicators are more likely to run into people they find difficult to work with. Whereas most people tend to work with a limited number of colleagues – their own version of Dunbar’s number (the concept, introduced by British anthropologist Robin Dunbar, that there is an upper limit (150) of stable social relationships individuals can maintain). In communications there is no Dunbar’s number.

“ Stakeholder management isn’t formally part of my role and it’s rarely mentioned, but it’s one of the biggest elements of my job. ”

Communicator, Hong Kong

“ It’s not just being able to perform but also have the right people skills (humour, holding it together under stress, making others feel valued). You need to cultivate these skills early in your career. The higher you go, the more these skills make the difference. ”

Communicator, Italy



vii. **Honesty:** With their birdseye view of the organisation and their responsibility to protect its reputation, communicators have to be ready to speak truth to power – especially when no one else is willing to do so. Sometimes this means getting a leader to say something they don't want to say. Sometimes, it's about stopping them doing something they have set their hearts on. Where others may like to please the emperor, communicators are trusted advisors – often the only ones able to say what needs to be said, however unpopular or difficult it may be.

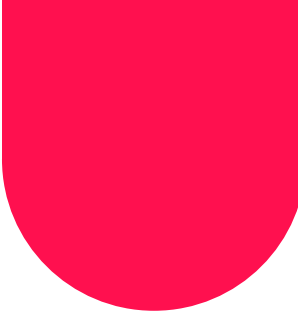
“ In my last company we had so many townhalls. Why? Because the top leaders wanted them. In other words, we did it to please them, not to benefit the business. When we're in that mode, we're playing games but not actually doing communications. ”

Communicator, Indonesia

viii. **Integrity:** Communicators have a unique role in that they both get to see how the sausage is made and then go out to sell the sausage. They work intimately with top leaders, witnessing at close quarters the gap that sometimes exists between lofty rhetoric and the imperfections in how decisions are made. Communicators need to take care to ensure this gap does not erode their enthusiasm when it comes to the public-facing side of their role. They must even be willing to be full-hearted in their public advocacy even with a decision or product they don't personally believe in. As one comms leader told me, “We need to be able to sell a dud with integrity”.

“ Lots of comms people grow numb through the judgement and stress. They detach and go through the motions. Then the company values feel very different from your personal experience ”

Communicator, Hong Kong



ix. **Working out-of-area:** Most communicators have experienced being asked for advice on projects where they have little knowledge or expertise. We get called into a project at the last minute and are asked, “What’s our line about this?” before we’ve had a chance to know what “this” is! Without sufficient confidence or presence of mind, it’s easy for communicators to end up taking responsibility for things that are beyond their role or influence.

“ Comms is a catch-all. There’s a feeling that “Comms will sort it!” ”

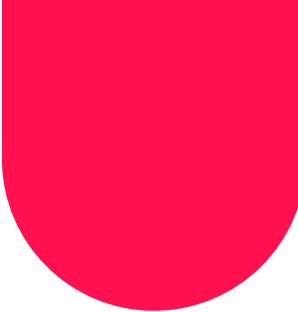
Communicator, UK

“ People across the organisation come and ask, "What can you do to fix this?" even if it's not really a comms issue. ”

Communicator, Hong Kong

“ We help make the things we communicate, even if we’re not knowledgeable about them. We don't have experience in a specific area but still need to influence the people there. ”

Communicator, Canada



x. **Judgement:** One of the most noteworthy features of communications work is how much it is based on the need for good judgement at speed. Almost all aspects of comms work - form, content, channel, tone or timing – are matters of subjective decision-making in a fast-paced environment. There is almost never an obviously right thing to do. On any particular question (Should we make a statement? What kind of video should this be? What channel should we use?), a good argument could be made for other, opposing courses of action. Communicators have to be able to assess the pros and cons, make a quick call under pressure and project confidence, all the while accepting that there's no real way to know if another decision might have worked out better.

“ There's a significant dimension of fake-it-till-you-make-it. Half script, half tap dance. You think, "I didn't get fired today so that's a good thing. ”

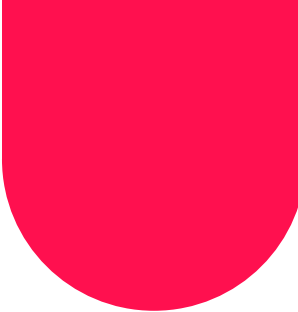
Communicator, Canada

“ I don't know what the f*** we're doing in comms half the time. There's a huge difference between what the leaders think and how it feels to us at the coal face. The variety of what we do means comms can feel quite random unless our leaders are very careful. ”

Communicator, Hong Kong

“ There's a voice in your head with nagging doubts. Even though you have an inner confidence, there's also an inner insecurity - what if I got this wrong? There's no algorithm or obvious answer – you just have to make a lot of judgements at speed. So there can be a lot of second-guessing yourself, especially if you don't have a supportive manager. ”

Communicator, UK

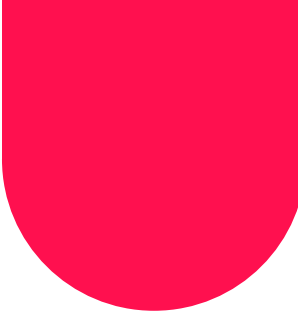


xi. **Storymaking:** A great strength of communicators is their ability to tell stories. Indeed, many communicators take pride in describing themselves as “Storytellers”. Storytelling is powerful and healthy – so long as you know you are telling a story. Sometimes, though, we can find ourselves making up a story without even knowing it. At those times, this strength can become a weakness.

Inadvertent storymaking happens when we are unaware of the prisms through which we experience our lives. We think we are seeing the world as it is, whereas we are really seeing one storified version of reality selected from among many possible alternatives. Sometimes it can have negative consequences, such as causing rifts within teams, preventing someone doing the self-work they need to reach their next level of personal growth, or causing someone to mentally checkout or resign.

“ I once had a terrible boss and felt pretty sorry for myself. It’s only looking back that I realised how much good I took away from the experience, and how much better I could’ve handled it. I’d been telling a story. It wasn’t inaccurate but now I see it really was just a story version of the truth - and there were other, more constructive stories I could’ve told. ”

Communicator, UK



xii. **VUCA**: An added factor that is currently compounding all the others is how fast the communications sector is changing. To borrow from the military term, comms is becoming increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA).

The impact of technologies like social media and artificial intelligence is generating powerful changes in expectations and capabilities that are impacting the nature of the work in real time. In one recent survey, more than a fifth of workers (21%) say that AI has forced them to consider a change of profession, double the number just a year earlier. (What is the true impact of AI at work? Addeco Group, Nov 2024)

While comms is not alone in this regard, it is among the sectors being impacted the most. Many of the communicators I spoke with remarked on how much and fast their work was changing. Several spoke with trepidation about what it might mean for their roles in the foreseeable future, while others were more hopeful and excited.

“ Technology is having a big impact. 10-20 years from now I'm not sure what value we'll be able to bring. Time urgency is another new pressures - there'll be no time to create stories! ”

Communicator, Hong Kong

“ AI can do a lot of what communicators have traditionally done. But it can't match the emotional, creative resources. In an increasingly volatile world, those resources will enable people to move up and be safer. ”

Communicator, Singapore

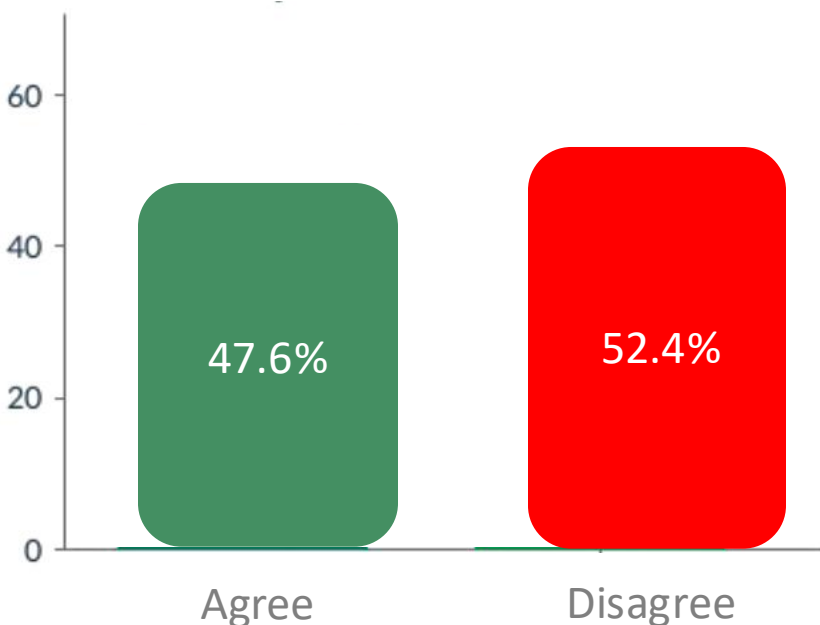
What Communicators Say

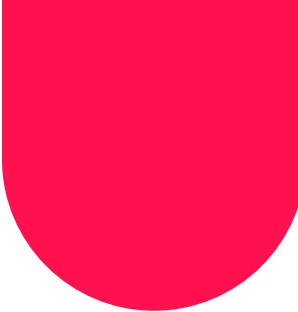
Opinion was fairly evenly split on this hypothesis among communicators who took part in my survey (42 responses).

A slight majority (52%) disagreed. One respondent explained, “I think the concept of inner resources can be a ‘secret super power’ but certainly not limited to comms.” This was echoed by another respondent: “Handling pressure, developing good relationships and accessing creativity are the basis for success in any career and anyone with weaknesses in those areas will encounter a glass ceiling.”

Nearly 48% agreed took the opposite view. One respondent added, “I feel like inner resources are increasingly important as one grows in their career. An emotionally intelligent individual with unique and consistent inner resources will be the one moving up and appreciated by all levels of co-workers and clients, and it will be assumed that this person has solid job skills.”

“Comms requires a special mix and depth of inner resources compared to most other careers”





Hypothesis 3: Communicators can benefit simply from seeing special quality

If you've stayed with me to this point and have at least partial agreement with the first two hypotheses, you might have a far bigger question on your mind: so what? Even if I accept the suggestion that inner resources are especially important in communications, what difference does that make to me?

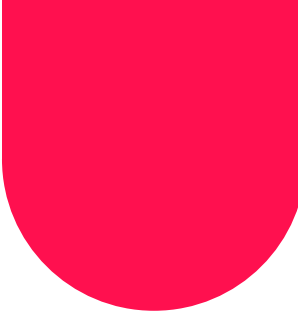
The difference, I believe, is that understanding the inner game and the primacy of inner resources brings a wide range of benefits that have the potential to empower communicators and change their work experience for the better.

The benefits of understanding the primacy of inner resources

Whenever our understanding of something improves, we gain an enhanced sense of power. A deeper understanding gives us more knowledge about what we can do in a given situation, including whether and how to act.

For example, when I understand that the human body is designed to float, I gain confidence to enter the water. When I understand the real-world risks of speeding, I become a safer driver. When I understand the natural learning cycles of any new undertaking, I become more open to new experiences. When I deepen my understanding role of emotions, I become more resilient to my experiences.

When it comes to communications, better understanding the role of inner resources offers at least eight significant benefits.



i. **Greater appreciation and pride:** There's a scene in Molière's *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* where Monsieur Jourdain is excited to learn he's been speaking prose for 40 years without knowing it! I believe communicators' self-appreciation can experience a similar surge on understanding how unusually challenging their profession is and how talented and disciplined one must be to succeed in it.

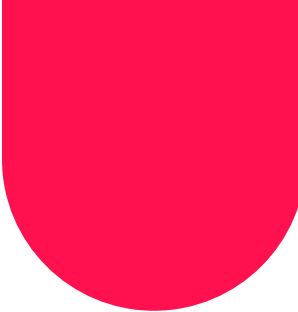
A common refrain among communicators is how undervalued the profession is. What they mean (but don't always say) is that this undervaluing is done by outsiders. Yet I sometimes wonder if that is also sometimes done by communicators (myself included). A better response to any outsider undervaluation would be to deepen self-appreciation and work from there.

“ I'm still embarrassed about telling people I'm in PR. It's not considered a sophisticated profession. Ironically, we don't sell ourselves in the best way. I'd like the industry to see ourselves as a separate part of management consultancy. ”

Communicator, UK

“ We're seen as generalists. So we don't get the value that other professionals do within our organisations. We internalise those thoughts too sometimes. ”

Communicator, Hong Kong



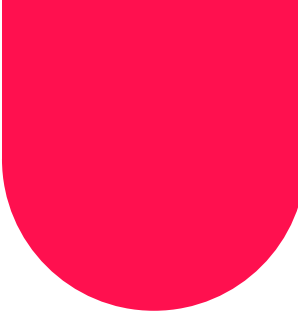
ii. **Depersonalisation - "It's not about me"**: When one gets a better understanding of the qualities of communications as a profession, it begins to feel a lot less personal. One sees that, relative to many other professions, there are structural factors in comms that make certain challenging experiences more likely.

For example, a comms professional is relatively more likely to find themselves in a situation where they need to decide on the spot if they are willing to say the thing no one else is willing to say. Similarly, because comms pros have to work with almost everyone, they are relatively more likely to have to work with individuals they personally find disagreeable.

Simply knowing that these situations reflect the nature of comms makes them predictable and impersonal. A comms pro will know to expect them because that's a facet of communications, not in any way a comment about them. Accepting and indeed embracing this fact (rather than lamenting it) is itself a quality of a good comms professional.

“ Previously I thought I was cynical as a personality or nationality trait. But now I see it's actually a symptom of our role. Our integrity is sometimes put on the line by company or client decisions. It makes you develop a thick skin. ”

Communicator, Hong Kong



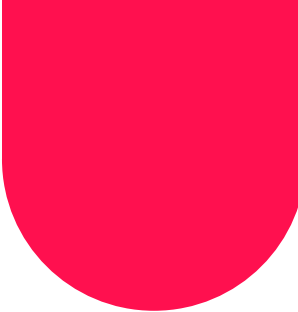
iii. **A lighter load:** As one's experience is depersonalised, one spends less time worrying and more time open to new experiences. Because "it's not about me," one has less at stake, less to lose, and less to protect. At the boundary of one's experience, one is better able to shift from survivor mode (trying to figure out and adhere to the rules of the game) to adventure mode (exploring areas that might have previously felt uncomfortable). With a lighter load, fewer situations are seen as high stakes and the sense of personal risk is lower. One feels less need to scan for danger. The workplace is experienced as a psychologically safer environment.

iv. **More prepared for challenges:** Communicators spend many years becoming familiar with the demands of the profession. For many, the intensity, speed, unpredictability, and high stakes nature of comms combine to make this a steep and sometimes stressful learning curve. Often, one isn't even aware of being on the curve. The feeling is being vulnerable and exposed.

Some communicators feel this steep learning curve is unavoidable. However, many felt that if they had been sat down early in their career and explained the kinds of challenges and pressures inherent to comms, they would have felt more prepared and in control when these manifested for real. Challenges would have been received in a healthier, more impersonal way. When one knows what's coming, one is more confident about being able to handle it.

“ Just to normalise stress in our industry would make a big difference. My mum spotted I was stressed. I hadn't noticed. Even if I did, I wouldn't have admitted it. It would feel like a sign of weakness. I thought I just needed to work harder and longer to get on top of things. ”

Communicator, Hong Kong

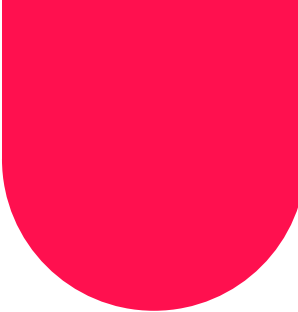


v. **More energy and focus:** A significant consequence of feeling safer, lighter and more in control is that it frees up headspace and energy for more creative and productive endeavours. One is more able to view one's workplace neutrally, not interpreted through a fog of fear, threat or blame. One can approach work in a more relaxed manner.

With that starting point, one has more scope to seize opportunities to try new things, take risks, and enter into collaborations – despite having no assurance of a positive outcome. For example, one might be more proactive in speaking up, be more willing to suggest a bold change, or respond more positively to a request or challenge. Over time, this is likely to have a positive cumulative impact for one's career as well as for one's team and organisation.

vi. **More likely to pay attention to developing inner resources:** As a person becomes more mindful of the power of their own inner resources to positively shape their experience, they begin to place more attention on this rather than on external factors. The more this becomes a habit, the more the person becomes resilient to whatever is happening outside. Life becomes less about what is happening “to” you, and more about what is happening “through” you. The locus of power shifts from “out there” to “in here”.

A “stressful meeting” becomes just a plain gathering in which the person has more freedom to respond in any way they choose. An awkward social situation is now just a neutral encounter to which one no longer has to respond awkwardly. An overwhelming job is seen as an opportunity to rise to a new challenge and gain new experiences.



vii. **More likely to see the same in other people:** As a person becomes more mindful of the impact their own inner resources has on themselves, they also begin to better appreciate the same in others. As they begin to see that it's not so much the outside world that shapes their experience but their ability to understand and respond to it, they see this is also true for everyone. They become far less reactive and far more compassionate to the people around them.

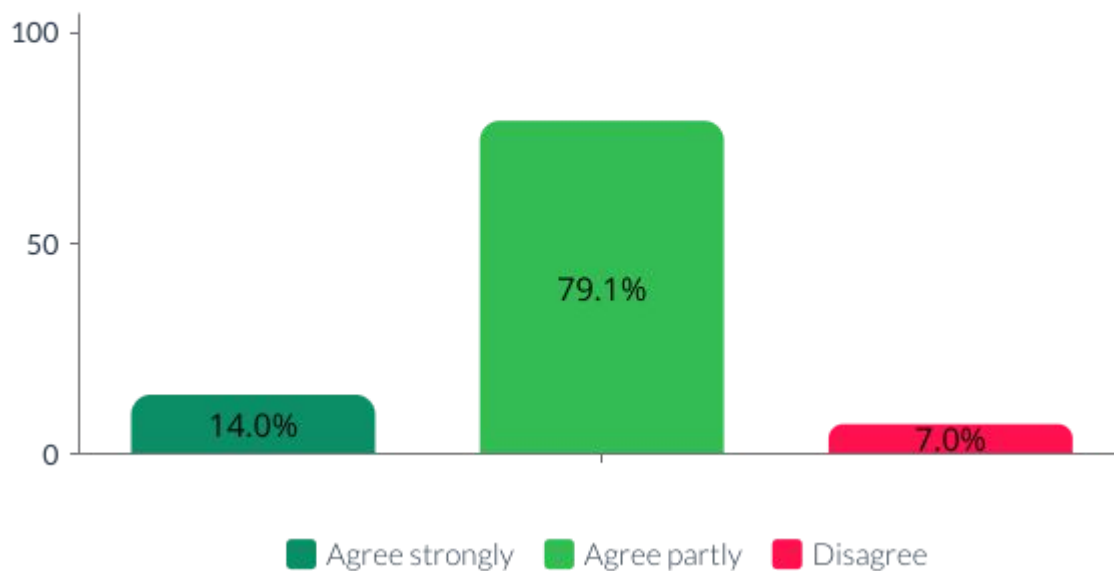
Insofar as other people may behave in negative ways, one begins to appreciate a certain innocence in them. Most people don't set out with hurtful intentions. Where someone's behaviour looks unfair to us, to them it feels justified. However poorly the other person may behave, it poses a much lower risk of triggering a reaction in us. With deeper inner resources, we begin to reclaim our power of response-ability.

viii. **Shift to the inner game:** The cumulative effect on these benefits is a gradual shifting towards the inner game. Playing the inner game helps us to focus our energies in a neutral way on whatever is truly happening (free of the distortions of our own thoughts, feelings and beliefs). Players of the inner game feel a freedom to be guided by their intuition and respond in the most appropriate manner. In contrast, the mind of someone playing the outer game will have less clarity, and be polluted with extraneous thoughts centred not on the issue at hand but on themselves, others' perception of them, and the implications for their career.

What Communicators Say

Communicators were emphatically supportive of Hypothesis Three. More than 90% of respondents agreed either strongly or partly that it would've helped if someone had explained earlier in their career how special comms is in terms of mix and depth of inner resources (43 responses).

"It would've helped if someone had explained earlier in my career how special comms is in terms of the mix and depth of inner resources"



Hypothesis 4: Inner resources are not fixed - but we act like they are

Even if you agree there is some benefit to understanding the primacy of inner resources within communications, a final question remains: what, beyond improving my understanding, can I do actually do about it?

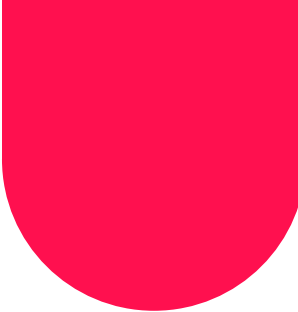
There's a common belief that a person's inner resources are fixed. Or, if not exactly fixed, that there's little one can proactively do to improve them. As mentioned above, many of the comms pros I spoke with likened inner resources to personality. They saw inner resources as being essentially something we're born with and that any change is, at best, evolutionary, slow and unbidden.

“ Age is a thing too. It's been a big learning curve to not rush, to take time. I was like this even into my late 40s. If I was coming in aged 20, there's no way I would be able to do a good job at a high level. ”

Communicator, UK

Indeed, in my survey nearly half of respondents felt that inner resources were mostly or somewhat fixed. Bear in mind that the respondents included a number of my former clients, who were thus likely to lean towards my views. It is therefore likely that a more representative sample would have an even bigger majority in this same direction.

The “fixed” model of inner resources is one I would have been sympathetic to myself in past years. I largely viewed inner resources as supplied at birth – so much so that I sheepishly and regretfully admit that I did not make significant investments in my own inner resources back then, when it would have had maximum impact.



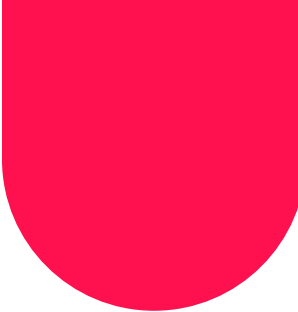
Most of my life, the big challenge was understanding how the outside world worked, working out the rules of the game and then developing the necessary skills to compete. This largely meant the accumulation of knowledge and experience. On that slender loop I built my career.

When I look back now I notice that almost all my training and development was skills-based. How to read faster. How to speak better. How to write with impact. How to create snappy videos. How to be a strategic thinker. How to negotiate. How to be more productive. How to leverage new technologies.

The thread uniting all those forms of training is that they all look outwards. All of them are based on a development model that focuses on the acquisition of intellectual knowledge from an external source. This is true even of a distinctly more progressive form of development that I've tried, mentoring, which is still rooted in the same model of passing down expertise from an external source. (The term “mentor” comes from Homer’s *Odyssey*: before setting off on his adventures Odysseus asks his friend, Mentor, to educate his son: “Tell him everything you know”).

Learning from the inside out

Looking back on my own training and development, there is one course that stands out, both in form and impact. This was a week-long residential course titled, Personal Effectiveness. In my eyes, its key quality was that it involved very little (if any) passing down of knowledge. There were no textbooks. No presentations. No exams. The instructors did not instruct. The most memorable element was the plenary sessions, which involved all the participants sitting silently in a circle, until someone had the nerve to speak up.



Gradually, we all opened up to each other and shared more about what was going on for us individually. Over the five days, we learned a huge amount about ourselves, and thereby grew in self-awareness and confidence.

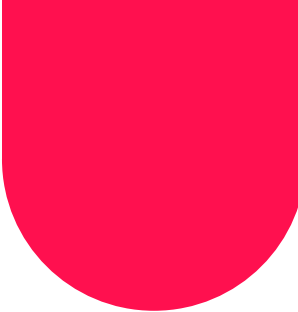
The personal effectiveness did not come outside-in from trainer to student, but inside-out from student to group. Twenty years later, it remains by far the best training I've ever taken.

For many years, I thought this approach to learning was a one-off, limited to this one course. However, I have gone on to learn it is not just prevalent and applicable across all fields, but one of the most sustainably impactful forms of learning.

It was, I now see, a form of inside-out learning which is not only possible but necessary when we are looking for a significant shift or upgrade in performance. As psychologist Peter Gray writes, "Learning, real learning, the kind that sticks and has an impact on a person's life, is always generated from within". (Changing our Minds, Naomi Fisher, 2021, p.xiv).

In recent years I have practised much more inner learning, both coaching and being coached. This has helped me appreciate more deeply the way inside-out learning enables people to tap into and leverage their inner resources.

Coaching is not about the coach's knowledge, but helping the individual better understand themselves and access their gifts so they can interact with the world more easily, confidently and with less on their mind. This is why many of the highest qualities of creativity and leadership all point in the same direction:

- 
- Integrity
 - Initiative
 - Insight
 - Inspiration
 - Innovation
 - Intuition
 - Instinct
 - Ingenius
 - Ingenuity
 - Intention
 - Inventive

Having coached around 70 individuals, the single biggest cohort of whom has been communication professionals, I have been privileged to help many people better leverage their inner resources. While each case is unique, a common pattern is that most start off wanting help with a particular outer problem or skill – say, public speaking – but end up tracing that back to a deeper issue rooted in their inner game.

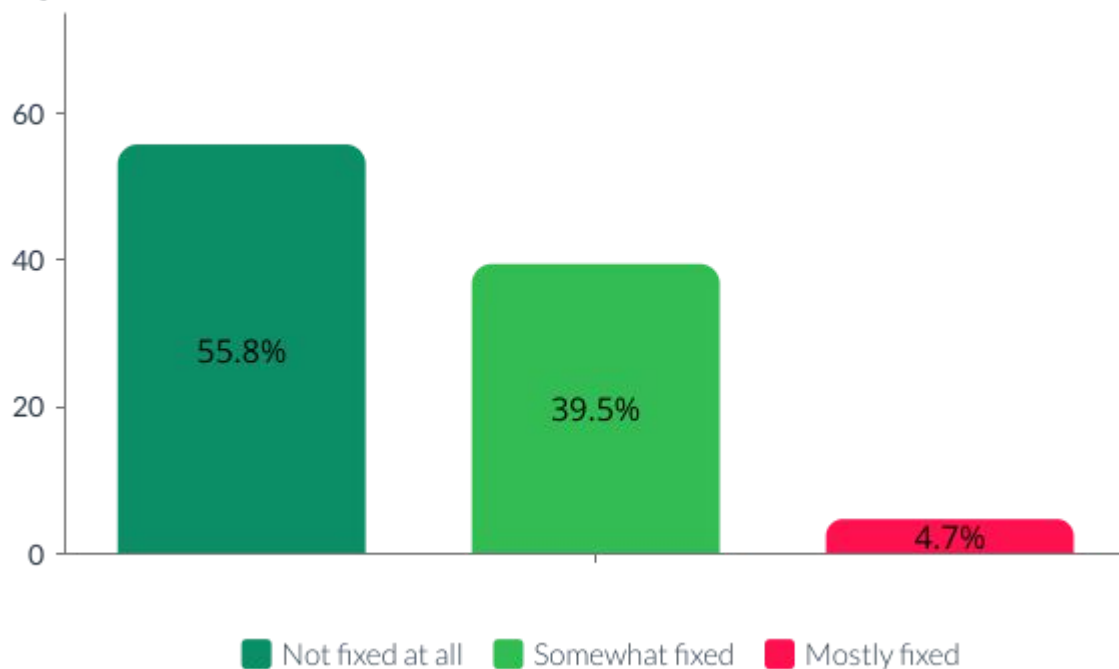
When one looks within, the outer problem tends to resolve itself. The individual also tends to feel more grounded, confident and in control, impacting them positively in ways they had not anticipated. They get a powerful glimpse that performing well is less about what's happening “out there” but more about what's going on “in here”. They get a sense of reclaiming a power they didn't know was missing.

Most importantly, learning from the inside-out makes it possible to leverage ones inner resources in a short time. One is not limited to learning through the slow-burn of external circumstance, the pot luck of coming across a particularly good mentor, or the bruises of bad mistakes. Through learning approaches like coaching, one can take direct control and speed up the learning cycle. In Part Three I illustrate how this can work with some case studies from my coaching practice.

What Communicators Say

Opinion among communicators is fairly split on this hypothesis. A clear majority (56%) of respondents said an individual's inner resources are not fixed at all. However, a large minority (44%) said that one's inner resources are either somewhat or mostly fixed. (43 responses).

In your view, how fixed are an individual's inner resources?



3

CASE STUDIES

Using coaching case studies to get more concrete about playing the inner game and accessing inner resources.

Key Points

Part 3 sets out that there are many ways to improve inner resources, and zeroes in on one way: coaching. It illustrates this through seven case studies. The intention is to move from the abstract to the concrete so readers can gain a clearer grasp of what it can be like to work on our inner game.



There are many ways we can work on our inner game. For example, we can join supportive communities, cultivate meditation or mindfulness, practise journaling, chanting or prayer, go on a retreat, develop breathwork, or engage in various forms of therapy.

The practice I am personally most familiar with is coaching. What follows is a series of case studies of communication professionals who invested in their inner resources by turning to coaching (with me as their coach!).

Through coaching, these individuals unlocked fresh perspectives, gained clarity and calmness, and found meaningful personal breakthroughs in their approach to work. While each conversation was unique, for easy reference I have structured them all with a simple, consistent pattern: the **situation** the individual found themselves in, the **approach** we took in our conversation, the key **insight(s)** the person obtained, and the **result** they achieved.

i. **Peter: a better host**

Situation: Peter wanted help to be a better event host. In particular, he wanted to be able to interact more smoothly with guest speakers and the audience.

Approach: Rather than look at speaking or presentational techniques, we focused on what was going on in Peter's mind that might be getting in the way.

Insights: This revealed a deep-seated fear of being judged ("feels like the audience is pointing guns at me!"). This was interfering with Peter's natural thought process, similar to when one is distracted by a second conversation in the room.

Result: Once we addressed this fear, Peter was able to interact very naturally and with confidence at his next event.

ii. Mary: healthier relationships

Situation: Mary was transitioning into a new role after a bad experience at her last company. She had a challenging relationship with her last boss, who somehow always managed to find fault. She was low in confidence and worried the problem could repeat. What if she got another bad boss? What if her last boss was right after all and she'd over-estimated her own ability?

Approach: instead of getting into the weeds of Mary's fear, we zoomed out to find where else we might find echoes of it in other relationships. The idea was to identify any recurrence or habit that might be finding form in her life.

Insights: The breakthrough came when Mary casually mentioned she also had a strained relationship with her mother. It revealed a more general habit of deferring to authority figures to take responsibility for her relationships. So long as the authority figure obliged Mary felt fine; if not, she felt stuck and unhappy.

Result: Mary realised she didn't have to wait on others but could initiate and lead. Seeing this, Mary came away feeling empowered and free, and felt more equipped and confident starting the new role.

iii. Dan: fearing change

Situation: Dan was feeling demotivated and on the verge of resigning after 20 years with his company. The apparent problem was that management wanted to move him sideways into a post he had little experience in. He sought my help influencing upwards so he could persuade them to change their minds.

Approach: we initially played a game of “whack-a-mole” as Dan identified successive issues that appeared to be the source of his unhappiness. As we zoomed in, none of these seemed especially important. We then looked at what common threads might be at work behind these “moles”.

Insights: Dan saw that the real issue was a pattern of reacting badly to unexpected change. Unexpected change heightened his sense of uncertainty, which in turn triggered personal and scary “what-ifs”. He saw this was a repeated pattern in his life, including in the way he interacted with his spouse and children.

Result: Dan saw that, unintentionally, he was constantly making assessments about the future, and that those assessments were based more on fear than fact. Seeing this, his fear lost some of its grip – enough that Dan recommitted to the company, and embraced the opportunities of his new role. He also reported back that he was feeling happier, more relaxed and “in the moment” with his family.

iv. Ian: triggering expectations

Situation: Ian was a senior comms executive, in charge of a team of hundreds across multiple markets. Ironically Ian had a communication problem with one of his direct reports. He found this particular employee triggering for reasons he struggled to understand.

Approach: we looked at what qualities Ian was seeing in his troublesome employee, how he knew that he was being triggered and where he had encountered such feelings before.

Insights: it became apparent that this situation was only ostensibly about this employee. Ian had a history of being triggered by other individuals he felt were a similar “type”. He even felt he could predict the unsatisfactory things they were going to say in advance, causing him to feel a pre-emptive frustration. He also noticed that there were times when he spent time with this employee without being triggered.

Result: The coaching helped Ian depersonalise his experience. He saw this was not really about his team member but about his own expectations of them, which he was unknowingly using to (pre)judge them. Seeing this, a space opened up for him to suspend his judgement, be watchful of his own emotions, and allow his employee space to surprise him.

v. Tony: not being heard

Situation: Tony was corporate comms leader who felt mixed up, lost and on the verge of resigning. His biggest challenge was that – despite having a successful comms career, financial security and had a happy home life – he didn't know why he felt this way.

Approach: we mapped out all the possible reasons for Tony's feelings – including a company reorganisation, cutbacks, management style, market conditions and his own age (nearing 50) – and what he noticed in his body as we touched on each.

Insights: it became apparent that Tony's feelings were the result not of any of the issues he'd cited but an old inner anxiety that he wasn't being heard. On reflection, Tony saw he'd lived with this all his life but most of the time it was below the surface enough that he was able to ignore it.

Result: Tony felt relieved to have clarity about where his feelings were coming from and why. He found a fresh appetite for his work, recommitted to the company and struck a closer relationship with his manager.

vi. Mark: reconnecting with intuition

Situation: Mark was a civil servant who, after a run of highly successful roles and turning 30 years old, felt his career was at a plateau. Maybe it was time for him to go do something more exciting in the private sector. He felt paralysed with indecision.

Approach: since the situation felt so disabling for Mark, we shifted the focus instead to the kind of positive feelings he he'd experienced in the past when he'd successfully dealt with other dilemmas. This helped point Mark toward the source of how he'd made big decisions before.

Insights: Mark saw that his struggle was not the surface problem itself but the way he was approaching it. He rediscovered a deeper, more intuitive power that had allowed him to resolve similar dilemmas in the past.

Result: Mark reawakened to an old sense of coherence and empowerment, and the answer to his problem became immediately clear. He felt a new burst of energy and positive energy towards his career.

vii. Connie: breaking down the opposition

Situation: Connie was Head of Internal Comms for a large multinational and was leading the comms workstream of a major transformation project that was facing resistance from the leadership team and was at risk of failing.

Approach: we took a playful approach, toying with different scenarios and analogies that allowed Connie to see her situation from fresh, fun perspectives, such “appointing” her 5-year old daughter as an advisor.

Insights: Connie imagined that her child would advise to go ask her “best friend”. This helped Connie see that she’d been treating the leadership team as a single block of opposition. Once she mentally scanned for a friend she immediately relaxed and started to see a way through.

Result: Connie gained a deeper understanding what was going on. Instead of trying to win round the whole leadership team, she was able to identify a few leaders as key influencers. These could not only make her role more pleasant but could help shift the tide on her behalf.

3

BENEFITS

How playing the inner game directs us towards clarity of mind, healthier relationships and better listening - and why that's good for communicators and their stakeholders.

Key Points

Communications professionals are experts in shaping narratives, influencing stakeholders, and crafting compelling messages. My suggestion is that they perform these roles to a significantly higher standard when they have a greater understanding of the inner game of communications. I'm also suggesting that, as they raise their game, the inner game also offers benefits to their organisations and their stakeholders.

In Part 4 I outline some areas inspired by the inner game. Specifically, I outline how comms professions can help achieve and promote clarity of mind for themselves and their organisations. To achieve this, I argue in favour of a much greater emphasis on connection and relationships. And to achieve that, I encourage giving far more weight to listening as a core element within corporate communications.

Clarity of mind

How is clarity of mind relevant to communications? Let me explain by reference to my own experience as a comms leader. For many years I faced some perennial challenges, ones that my team and I always struggled to address no matter what we tried. For example, our efforts to increase email open rates, social media views and townhall attendances were mostly in vein, despite vastly improving content, promotion and platforms.

I now see more clearly that to a large extent the real issue was simply that people already had full minds before our content was delivered. What a person sees is dependent on what's already in their mind. When their mind is cluttered or shaped by pre-existing beliefs, it is not in a proper state to receive new content. If they see it at all, it is corrupted by their internal filters.

Through playing the inner game, we can be more aware that we all see through the prism of our own inner worlds. There is no objective, single, neutral reality. An inner-game approach to comms would factor this in by helping to set the conditions for people to have a quieter, clearer mind in advance of sharing content.

Only with clarity of mind do we have capacity to receive something new. Previously, I saw my role as creating content that would cut through the noise. Now I see that a missing element was helping people to dial down the noise in the first place.

This approach suggests that corporate communications puts far more emphasis on the structural foundations that allow for communications to work. I'm pointing here to the importance of relationship.

Healthier relationships

A peculiarity during the time I worked in communications is that there was no agreed definition of the term. For clarity, my own definition is this:

Communications: a conversation in pursuit of a relationship.

For me, any communications is effective only insofar as it's part of a conversation. This in turn is effective only insofar as it prioritises the relationship that it serves.

In my experience, as both communicator and coach, the most direct and effective way to nurture a relationship is to focus on connection. Connection means each party has something at stake in the relationship, something that incentivises both sides to make it work. Connection is the beginning of openness, trust and a willingness to at least suspend any instinct to dismiss, judge, criticise or compare.

There are many ways we can establish and deepen connection. But in my view they are all branches of the same, single tree: listening.

Listening

Listening (at least the authentic kind) conveys respect, interest and care. It is the key to gaining the clarity one needs for good decision-making. It is at the root of Stephen Covey's famous dictum, Seek first to understand, then to be understood. It is the key – often missing – piece that enables communications to be genuinely two-way and conversational.

In recent years corporate communications has done a much better job moving in the direction of two-way, conversational communications. However, to a significant extent this has been limited to creating more conversational-style content, such as informal videos, stand-alone polling or Q&As. This is helpful, but falls far short of what most of us know from our own experience to be authentic conversation.

What would happen if we conducted our real-life relationships this way? Imagine we spent most of the time talking or focusing on how we talk, and gave our friends only periodic, frozen-in-time opportunities to ask a question or offer an opinion on questions we ourselves chose. What would that do to the quality of our relationship?

We should also consider the proportion of our listening versus talking. All research appears to agree on one thing: we should listen more than we talk. One extensive study analysed over 25,000 calls to find what made for great sales calls. They concluded that the most successful had a talk-listen ratio of 43:57, while in the least successful the salesperson talked for more than 60% of the time. (*The 43:57 talking-listening ratio that makes for brilliant conversations*, Big Think, 2022) If this was even remotely accurate within our organisations, what does that suggest about our likely success rate?

If we wanted to take a new approach and dial up our listening to be more equal to talking, what would that look like? Here are seven ideas:

i. Reverse Q&A & polling

- The leader poses a question – and then shuts up. The audience members answer and respond. The leader waits until the audience is ready to move on to the next question.
- The leader invites audience questions and then asks the audience to answer them. The leader remains in listening mode.
- Employees create polling questions for the leadership team. The leadership team takes part in the poll and CEO then responds to the findings.

ii. Focus groups

Communicators could host focus groups or listening circles where stakeholders can share their thoughts and feelings on the organisation as a whole. Consider bringing in independent providers to ensure safe, judgement-free spaces where people feel comfortable to speak up.

Alternatively, communicators could create similar forums where front-line managers can both hear and respond to employee feedback. Give them opportunities and tools to feedback at or close to real time to help communications teams understand how their messaging is landing and any issues they may have missed.

iii. Beta-testing messaging

Several of my interviewees highlighted the role of judgement in coming up with messaging. There is no right or wrong way to do this – skillful communicators rely on their feelings. However, a more systematic approach would be to pilot messages with a trusted, representative sample of stakeholders. This could be done on a project or organisation basis, either as a one-off or on a regular timeline, say once a year. Beta-testing would be a useful way to not only improve our ability to craft messages but check what exactly is being heard by their stakeholders.

iv. Team Red / Team Blue

Communicators could review employee feedback through distinct lenses, making sure to spot concerns and patterns that might lie below the surface or be easily missed. Team Red, for example, could be tasked with spotting explicit concerns and prioritising them based on the number of times they are mentioned. Team Blue, in contrast, could be tasked with looking for tone, emotion or what's not being said compared to what the leaders expected or desired, or to what they themselves know to be true.

v. Listening workshops

Communicators could host workshops for managers to consciously improve their listening skills. The more managers are able to practise active listening, the more they can model the same for others and generate continuous feedback loops. Over time, this could also be a significant contribution to generating a listening culture across the organisation, where team members get a visceral experience of being heard, feeling safe to speak up, and in turn get better at listening to their internal and external stakeholders.

vi. Stakeholder-generated content

One of the biggest barriers any of us have to doing more listening is the time we spend talking! In the world of communications, this translates into the time it takes us to create our own content. This barrier could be diminished by teams redefining their role away from content creators and more towards content facilitators. Comms teams can almost always do more to shift their resources to commissioning customers, employees and other stakeholders to create the content.

vii. Pre-coffee chat

In recent years a welcome development has been skip-level coffee chats, where leaders meet stakeholders one-on-one. A limitation is that these tend to be dominated by the leader. Stakeholders can be deferential or fearful, often leaving it too late to fully share their views or questions. The problem here is lack of connection. To address this, a leader might have a short, light online meeting with the group for the purposes of establishing a connection, without any substantial conversation. The purpose would be for the individuals to introduce themselves and for the leader to express how much they are looking forward to speaking and perhaps offer a question for the others to think about. By the time of the coffee chat proper, connection has been established, allowing a richer, more value-add conversation.

viii. Shift communications domains

Most organisations and leaders have a favoured form or “domain” of communications they default back to, regardless of any particular initiative. Drawing on the insights of Structural Dynamics, we can see how these tend to gravitate to one of three domains: Meaning, Power and Emotion (or, as I prefer to explain them, “Head, Hand, and Heart”).

Many thoughtful leaders tend to favour the domain of meaning (Head), ie focusing on ideas, purpose and value. Some, often more traditional-style leaders, favour the domain of power (Hand), ie focusing their communications on getting things done. Some, perhaps a minority, focus on emotion (Heart), ie using the language of nurture, caring and feelings.

Communicators taking more account of the inner game would be more conscious of using all three domains, taking particular care to avoid neglecting emotion. Much of an audience’s resistance to messaging comes from feelings of stress. To be heard, we need to reduce or dilute this. As the saying goes, “Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care.” (Teddy Roosevelt, popularised by John Maxwell). Communicators would do well to identify their leaders’ favoured domain and messaging, and adjust accordingly.

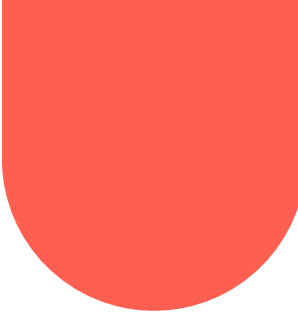
5

DESIGNED FOR SUCCESS

How the inner game reveals that the mind is designed for success - and why many communicators are missing out.

Key Points

Part 5 anticipates and responds to possible criticisms of the paper. It then outlines how a greater focus on one's inner game helps reveal how it is designed for success. Understanding this offers fresh reserves of the kinds of qualities that are invaluable to communicators, such as grounding, resilience and creativity.



As I write this I anticipate possible criticisms this paper will invite:

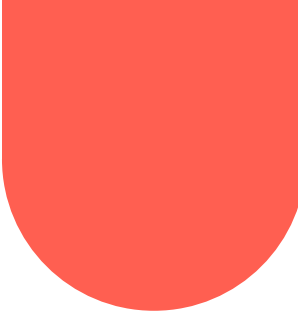
- *“This is nonsense – there’s no such thing as inner comms”*
- *“This isn’t for us – the inner world is for individual and their therapists”*
- *“Nice ideas – but I can’t see how it’s very practical”*
- *“This is old news – we know this already!”*

If any of these thoughts occurred to you, you’re right! As tempted as I am to respond to each one, the bigger point is that our viewpoints are dominated by our own inner game. I’d like to conclude the paper with a few words on this point and how it helps us see that inner comms has the potential to open up a new dimension to corporate communications.

We all see our worlds through the private prisms of our thoughts. Thoughts are the bat-and-ball of our inner game. Whatever one thinks about the inner game, so long as we think we’re always playing it. I’m playing it right now as I write. You’re playing it now as you read.

Our minds are constantly fizzing with thoughts. Many sources estimate we have 40,000 or more thoughts a day. Most will be stale, recycled thoughts, helping us confirm and repeat our old beliefs. Some will be judgements, keeping us safe – sometimes too safe – from going beyond our personal limits. A few will be fresh, creative thoughts that feel so good we allow them to lead us to our next bright idea.

So long as we know we’re playing the game, we can be more aware and in control of which thoughts we want to attend to. We can be more watchful of the thoughts that get in the way, and more open to those that offer the insights we need. We can be more in touch with the inner “unknown knowns”, clearing away the frustrations of mental fog and replacing it with the light clarity of our higher selves.



Above all, when we are mindful about playing the inner game, we become aware of a special, invisible and invaluable quality of the mind: it is designed for success.*

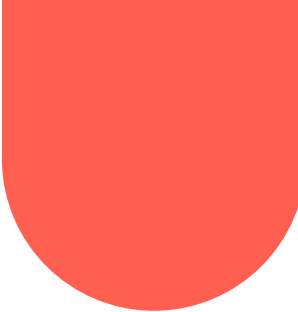
The mind is the field in which we play the inner game and the source of the key qualities we all need and want to live a happy and successful life: calmness, presence, creativity, resilience, a sense of flow, being “okay” and feeling part of something bigger than oneself.

From time to time, we all occasionally experience this field. It could be when we’ve stumbled across a great idea or solution, when we’ve overcome self-doubts, or when we are in the presence of someone who themselves operates from this space. One of the most common ways people describe this experience is that it “just feels right”.

When you work on the inner game you are better able to operate from this field – and more fully access your inner resources – more of the time. Life becomes less about striving for outer success and getting accidental glimpses of the inner field, and more about consciously playing from the field and enjoying outer success as a side benefit. One becomes far more resilient to and unaffected by the kinds of negative thoughts that separate us from the field and misdirect us back to the outer game.

For all these reasons, I believe that a greater focus on inner comms will be helpful both to individual communicators, their organisations and stakeholders. Communicators will get a better understanding of themselves, their audiences and their executives. In doing so, they will be able to dial down the noise and dial up connection for themselves and others, making for far more effective, impactful communications.

* The phrase “designed for success” is inspired by the work of Ken Manning, Robin Charbit and Sandra Krot in their book, *Invisible Power: Insight Principles at Work - Everyone's hidden inner capacity* (2015).



The model of the inner game helps us see how important the communicator's inner resources are to the organisation as a whole. In my experience, this is a largely neglected area. Most communicators, like most organisations, are tied to an outer-game model.

Some communicators I spoke with claimed that they indeed invested in their inner resources. A few had taken up practices like coaching, therapy or meditation. Mostly, this meant reading self-help books, browsing for information online or asking questions via AI. While each of these methods is helpful, they also suggest there is scope for doing much more.

If you've kept with me this far into the paper, I will be so bold as to suggest that, insofar as such methods touch at all on the inner game, they are forms of knowledge and learning. In other words, they take us back to the outside-in model and relate to the intellect.

In contrast, the inner game directs us towards practices that help us operate from a quieter or even empty mind. In other words, it points in the direction of the spiritual.

We see a similar pattern with helping professions that support communicators to improve. A quick, AI-enabled search among online providers shows a focus almost entirely on elements of the outer game:

Communications Strategies: identifying the priorities and methods to improve reach and impact.

Storytelling & messaging: crafting narratives that align with corporate strategy and resonate with stakeholders.

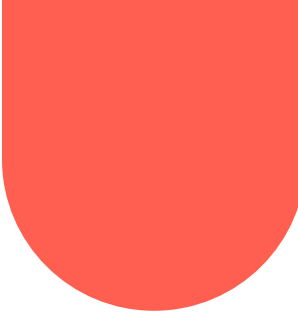
- **Engagement:** developing more appealing and creative communication to improve employee engagement and influence behaviours.
- **Crisis Communications:** techniques for managing and mitigating crises to maintain trust and credibility.
- **Digital and Social Media:** using the right digital platforms and social media in the right way to enhance messaging and engagement.
- **Measurement and Analytics:** tools and metrics to assess the effectiveness of communication.

All of these are important. Every comms team would rightly want to work on them. Yet they are all facets of the outer game. The focus is on techniques, models, methods and tools.

What's missing is any acknowledgement of the real-life impact of one's inner resources, for example in terms of developing relationships, handling pressure and accessing creativity.

To the extent that communicators are missing out on opportunities to develop their inner resources, three main barriers came up in my conversations for this paper.

i. **Expectations.** For the most part, any expectation from leaders, organisations and comms experts to develop one's inner resources will usually be modest. Frankly, the inner game is not a typical conversation. Hence, there is little encouragement or incentive. Any impetus to invest time or money in this direction will be bottom-up, not top-down. If you think back over your career, to what extent have you picked up a sense that the inner game is a priority among your managers?



ii. **Cost.** While books and online tools are inexpensive or even free, some other forms of inner game investments are more costly. In a world where training budgets are often squeezed, many will be understandably pessimistic that their organisation will be supportive (though my personal experience is that, if provided with a reasonable business case, most are). For many communicators, the question will be whether they are prepared to make their own investments. And, while spending money on material items like gadgets and holidays are habitual, investing in oneself through something like coaching typically feels harder to justify

“ “In most of my positions there's been little or no budget for professional development. For most people that means they don't do professional development. You should stand out by investing in yourself. If you have the means, take that course and expand your horizon! ”

Communicator, Canada

iii. **Stigma.** While this was a surprising finding to me personally, it came up a number of times among the communicators I spoke with. They told me that seeking help on one's inner resources could be seen as an admission of inadequacy. Whereas it's fine to tell others we are working on our videography skills, it may feel less neutral to say we are developing our ability to handle stress or manage difficult relationships

“ I think we think of it as weakness when we realise we need to refine our inner skills. Seeking coaching or training should be looked at as growth and confidence not punishment or embarrassment ”

Communicator, Hong Kong

Final words

The process of developing this paper, from initial concept to my conversations with communicators and finally the writing, has been a journey of discovery.

At the start, concepts like inner game and inner resources were barely on the fringes of my awareness. As I conclude, I am convinced that they point towards a new dimension of corporate communications that currently lies largely unoccupied and ignored.

I am confident that, as more communicators consider exploring in this direction, they and their organisations will benefit handsomely. I know that this paper can, at best, be an initial attempt to spark curiosity and interest.

I hope that it may help stimulate a conversation that, in time, contributes to elevating corporate communications higher in impact, enjoyment and esteem for all the communicators who know, as I do, what a wonderful, rich and rewarding profession it can be.

And if you liked that...

If you are interested in coaching, a bespoke presentation or workshop for your team, or would simply like to share your comments, I'd love to hear from you at:
david@davidnorriskoaching.com





Designed for Success

– you’ve read the book, now
join the program!

Designed as a follow-up to the book, this 4-day online retreat will help you to show up with:

- more confidence, presence and peace of mind.
- less worrying and overthinking, more feeling happy.
- a simpler way to learn, gain insights and find solutions.
- a better understanding of why people do the things they do.

What past participants say:

- “The course unlocked a greater sense of peace within me”
- “I’ve never felt more present! Truly a life-changing course.”
- “Feel like I’ve found the piece of the puzzle I was looking for!”
- “It’s like a user manual for our mind. A toolkit I can use to show up with clarity, confidence, and calm.”

For details, visit:

davidnorriscoaching.com/designed-for-success-program